

## Piers Locke: ‘The Hattisar: The Integral Role of The Elephant Stable in the Apparatus of lowland Nepali Park Management’

### Slide 1: Introduction

In this presentation I will examine the Nepali institution of the elephant stable or *hattisar*, tracing its history of change and continuity within the broader context of Nepali state and society. I argue that although the uses for which captive elephants are deployed has changed as Nepal has embraced modern concerns of political reform, development and biodiversity conservation, the institutional sub-culture of the government stable or *sarkari hattisar* remains rooted in the structures and practices that emerged in the era of regal hunting expeditions for which it was originally established. With its own elaborated system of ranks and roles, I argue that the *hattisar* retains its own distinctive Tharu character as an enclaved and total institution. By providing an encompassing social environment in which men live and work, and are required to make intense and enduring commitments to their elephant companions, elephant handlers or *hattisares* represent an occupational community with their own distinct group habitus of attitudes, dispositions, competencies and forms of know-how, which is essential to the management of Nepal’s lowland national parks and conservation areas.

So that’s the basic gist of what I am trying to say today, although I should make a few caveats to begin with. My primary aim here is to provide an account of the history of the institution of the *hattisar*; to provide a contextual understanding of how it has come to take the form that it has and fulfil the functions that it does in a state committed to a complementary marriage of biodiversity conservation and nature tourism. However, this will prevent me from providing a comprehensive account of my argument for government elephant handlers or *sarkari hattisare* as a self-contained community with a very distinct sub-culture and professional identity rooted in shared working practice- I believe my account of the history of the *hattisar* is indicative of this, but the strictures of time will only allow me to hint at the more elaborated theoretical basis for this argument.

### Slide 2: The Hattisar in The Context of Nepali History

So, let me tell you about this distinctive and enveloping institution in which I lived, researched and worked, even apprenticing as an elephant handler myself.

Traditionally, in the state of Nepal the elephant stable, the *hattisar*, was maintained primarily to facilitate royal hunting expeditions or *rastriya shikar*, which were lavish affairs that could last for months, utilise hundreds of elephants, and the labour of thousands (see Smythies 1942). *Rastriya shikar* perhaps reached its apogee during the autocratic and isolationist rule of the Ranas, a clan that had ousted the Gorkhali Shah Kings from power in the Kot massacre of 1846, relegating them to a purely ceremonial role and keeping them under virtual house arrest (Stiller 1993:79-81, Whelpton 2005:46-47).

The Ranas established themselves as hereditary prime ministers and additionally populated almost all significant positions within government. By 1951 however, the ruling Ranas were forced into serious governmental compromise. This was achieved through the strategic collaboration of King Tribhuvan and the Nepali Congress, a group constituted by both disenfranchised Ranas of lower status (due to concubine mothers) and other activists claiming to be inspired by western values of democracy and socialism, as well as Hindu values of fraternity and equality. In an agreement known as 'The Delhi Compromise', King Tribhuvan had his full sovereign powers restored, whilst the Ranas formed an interim government in conjunction with the Nepali Congress, which would be responsible for holding elections to a constituent assembly with a mandate to author a democratic constitution, a demand that was not realised, and remained a source of discontent for the majority of factions within Nepal's fractious communist movement (Whelpton 2005:87).

The demise of the patrimonial and nepotistic Rana regime inaugurated a radical shift in direction for the Nepali polity, with changes that would alter the rationale for maintaining the institution of the *hattisar*. Nepal embraced the apparatus of international aid and development that emerged after the Second World War, and embarked upon an ambitious program of infrastructural development. In the lowland *Tarai*, where the state elephant stables or *sarkari hattisar* are located, most significant was the USAID sponsored program of malarial eradication. Other components of development in Nepal included road building, electrification and the implementation of a national school system, all intended to facilitate socio-economic development and national unity (see Whelpton 2005:122-153, and also Macfarlane 1993). The idea and institutional apparatus of *Bikas*, the Nepali for development, spread rapidly, was frequently invoked, and unfortunately became the basis for a

sense of national inferiority- this is because development was understood as the product of an imported modernity that was opposed to a native traditionalism that had to be remedied. Acquiring a fetishised status, *bikas* was all too often fatalistically considered an unrealistic and unobtainable ideal, due to the iniquitously mismanaged distribution of foreign aid resources (Bista 1991, Pigg 1992).

Initially government elephant stables or *sarkari hattisar* continued to be maintained for the purpose of facilitating royal hunts or *rastriya shikar*, albeit conducted for the pleasure of the restored Shah monarchy rather than the Rana maharajahs of old<sup>1</sup>. After the indignity of being deprived of power for so long, it would seem that Tribhuvan and his son and heir Mahendra were keen to take up the regal pursuits by which South Asian kings traditionally displayed their majesty, and they staged hunting expeditions of sufficient scale and grandeur to rival those of their Rana predecessors such as Juddha Shamsheer Rana. This necessitated enlarging the network of *sarkari hattisar* that had shrunk after the heyday of Rana extravagance.

In the early twentieth century, during the era of the Raj, the British Chief Conservator of Forests for Uttar Pradesh, E A Smythies, who also served as Forest Advisor to the Nepali Government, reported on various instances of *shikar* hosted by the aforementioned Rana maharajahs, some of which were staged to impress such auspicious guests as King George V in 1911, the Prince of Wales in 1921, and Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy of India, 1938. These *shikar* events entailed phenomenal expenditure in addition to a large resource base of captive elephants, and it was the land reserved for these events that would later be turned into national parks and conservation areas. On such occasions, several hundred elephants were assembled to facilitate the ring method of hunting by which tracked prey would be encircled by a wall of elephants, enabling the hunter to enter the enclosure and shoot the prey from elephant back. However, Juddha Shamsheer Rana's various extravagances soon resulted in the eclipse of this glorious era for elephant handling, which was further compounded by an earthquake that devastated the Kathmandu Valley in 1934, and then also troop commitments to support the British in defending Burma against the advancing Japanese in 1942. The state treasury was plunged into financial crisis,

---

<sup>1</sup> Whilst the Shah kings had formally retained their official title of *sri panch maharaja*, meaning 'five times honourable great king', the Ranas had assumed the title of *sri tin maharaja*, meaning 'three times honourable great king' (Whelpton 2005:47 and 62).

forcing a retrenchment of resources for the state's elephant stables. The number of *sarkari hattisar* would not recover until Tribhuvan resumed power, by which time the Shah dynasty was surely keen to reassert its honour after its prolonged ignominy as merely nominal, puppet monarchs. The rebuilding of the network of *sarkari hattisar* would have been an effective gesture with which to symbolically reassert its power and prestige.

### **Slide 3: King Mahendra Hosts Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip**

Besides records which testify to an increase in the number of state elephant stables in the new era of Shah rule (WWF-Nepal 2003:25, from data in Shrestha et al 1985), Bhagu Tharu, a venerable handler informant from my own field research reports participating in a *shikar* organised by King Mahendra at which 335 elephants were assembled. On this occasion, in 1960, King Mahendra even hosted Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip of Great Britain. The grandeur of events such as these may have resembled those of Juddha Shamsheer Rana, but they would not persist much longer.

### **Slide 4: How The Hattisar Emerged in Post-unification Nepal**

This historical synopsis provides us with an appreciation of the **traditional function** of the *hattisar* in Nepali society, but before I go on to outline the **modern** function of the *hattisar*, I would like to discuss the development of the actual institution of the *hattisar* in the Shah and Rana eras. The era I shall focus on is what can most conveniently be termed the 'post-unification' era beginning from 1769, by which time the Gorkhali King Prithvi Narayan Shah, had managed to conquer and consolidate his rule throughout the congerie of hill states and petty kingdoms that would constitute the geographical domain of the incipient Nepali state. With regard to captive elephants, what we know of this transitional time in which jurisdiction of the sparsely-populated *Tarai* switched from that of several primarily hill-based polities to the unitary administration of the Shah monarchy, is that elephants represented a currency of exchange, and that there were agreements to capture and supply elephants to the Great Mughal, and subsequently to the British. As the primary occupants of the malarial *Tarai*, with a subsistence strategy that incorporated the capture and taming of wild animals, it was the indigenous Tharu that conducted this capture of elephants from which their revenue-collecting masters would have profited.

### **Slide 5: What The Panjiar Documents Tell Us About Elephants in Tarai Society**

This existing Tharu skills base provides the foundation for the establishment of state-sponsored *hattisars*, for which the Panjiar Documents provide invaluable evidence. This remarkable collection of 50 parchment documents that have incredibly survived the humid climate of the *Tarai* were painstakingly collected by a Tharu man named Tej Narayan Panjiar over a period of 20 years, and they enable us to reconstruct the relationship between the state and the *Tarai*-dwelling Tharu. Seven of these documents pertain to matters of elephant management, ranging from 1783 to 1884 CE.

These documents serve to tell us three main things about elephants in *Tarai* society:

1. That elephants were reserved as royal property.
2. That the *hattisar* was an institution of the state.
3. And that there were considerable rewards available to the overseers of elephant capture and training.

### **Slide 6: Elephants as Royal Property**

The court of King Rana Bahadur Shah issued the earliest of the Panjiar documents pertaining to elephant training in 1783. In this document, one Hem Chaudhari is granted the right to train and ride a baby elephant captured by his son Madhuran Chaudhari in 1782. Chaudhari by the way was the name for a functionary, not unlike a *jimidar*, (like the North Indian *zamindar*) with juridical and revenue-collecting authority for a *praganna*, an administrative district comprising several villages. Incidentally, this has since become the most ubiquitous family name for Tharu people.

The key point about this document is that it reminds us that all elephants were the property of the king, and that their capture, training and use was subject to state regulation. However, it also suggests that not all elephants were necessarily kept in state *hattisars*, and that they were utilised to meet local needs as well as those of the state for *shikar* and ceremonial purposes. This gift of an elephant by the state to its

administrative servants was probably not an uncommon form of compensation for services rendered, what was termed *jagir*, which has since come to denote ‘salary’.

### **Slide 7: The Hattisar as an Institution of The State**

Some of the other documents, issued under the seal of Surendra Bir Bikram Shah in 1867 and 1877, during the later era of Rana rule, concern reports of financial mismanagement at a *hattisar* in the *Tarai* district of Mahottari. The stable manager is addressed by title and name, as *Subba Dewal*, thereby disclosing to us both the formal status of the *hattisar* and one of the roles within it. We are told that despite having presumably received its annual dispensation of funds, the men had not received their wages and the elephants had not been properly fed, resulting in starvation, the eating of earth and sickness. So this also tells us that *hattisars* were run by staff who were dependent upon the state not only for the resources to maintain the *hattisar*, but also for salaries that would have served to substitute for the time and energy they would otherwise have needed to engage in typical subsistence activities.

To prevent further incidents of mismanagement, the documents also stipulate that all future receipts and issued salaries should be checked by both the military and audit offices, which could be taken to indicate the state’s unwillingness to place its trust in exclusively autonomous Tharu institutions (as seems to be the case today). Perhaps most importantly though, what documents like these also reveal is the existence of a ranked hierarchy of relatively discrete roles not entirely dissimilar to those of contemporary government stables. Besides the *subba*, the managerial role of the *daroga* is also mentioned (and I think this term may be more specific to elephant handling than the generic term *subba*, which one also encounters in non-elephant handling contexts). Whilst some of the Panjiar documents suggest the superiority of the *daroga*, in the contemporary scheme he is second to the *subba*. Mention is also made of the *raut* as the chief of elephant catching operations, who in the contemporary scheme is junior to the *daroga*. In an era in which capture has been discontinued, the *raut* is responsible for the elephant care teams, and oversees the care of newborns and the training of captive born youngsters. Finally, mention is also made of the *phanet* as the elephant capturer, a term obviously related to the North Indian *phandi*, which also refers to capturers and trainers. In the

contemporary scheme, junior to the *raut*, and again bearing in mind the discontinuation of wild capture, the *phanet* is chief of a specific elephant's care team, which is ideally also composed of a *patchurwa* or grass-cutter, and a *mahut*. The *phanet* is though still the handler that will take the primary role in elephant training, being the one most intimately bound up with the trainee elephant in both practical and ritual ways.

#### **Slide 8: The Rewards Available to Overseers of Elephant Capture and Training**

Finally, the third aspect of captive elephant management in the Shah and Rana periods contained in the Panjiar Documents, is information about the rewards available to the overseers of elephant capture and training. In one document from Bara district (just a little east of Chitwan), issued by King Rajendra Bikram Shah in 1820, one Daya Raut is granted land previously given to one Bandhu Raut, as well as a *pagari* or turban of honour, a prestigious symbol of royal favour, in reward for his service to the state catching and training elephants. He is urged to continue capture operations by both the *jaghiya* and *khori kheda* methods, the former involving a wild elephant being chased, lassoed and then tethered, and the latter a method of herding elephants into a prepared enclosure. He is told to obey the instructions of the elephant stable manager or *daroga*, and to continue to enjoy the customary taxes and income from performing the elephant training function or *sidhali rautai*.

In the second of these documents, issued to Daya's son Kokil in 1827, Daya Raut is rewarded for his presentation of a one-tusked elephant or *ek danta hatti* to the King during a royal visit at Hariharpur. The reward, or *jagir*, is the heritable revenue-collecting responsibility for Babhani village under the authority of the *chaudhari* for Cherwant *praganna*. These were not inconsiderable rewards, because a license to collect revenue included the right to keep a portion for oneself, and to pass the right to one's heirs. Therefore, this was an era in which participation in the captive elephant business could reap rich rewards in terms of economic power and political authority, quite unlike the situation today I might add.

Whilst this informs us of the functions of the *raut*, it does not confirm his full integration into the ranks of the *hattisar* as we know it today – after all, the performance of his job could reap rewards of wealth and prestige that do not seem to

have been available to the stable manager. It seems possible then that he may have been a contractor who merely co-ordinated elephant capture, utilising the skills of trained handlers like the *phanet*.

Another of the Panjiar documents concerning one Anup Raut lends support to this supposition. Issued by the Rana ruler Ranuddip Singh under the seal of Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah in 1884, and again concerning Cherwant *praganna* in Bara district, he is very likely a descendant of Daya and Kokil. After capturing an elephant named Ranagambhir Gajahatti during a *rastriya shikar* dedicated to elephant capture, he is granted revenue-collecting rights to an additional village in the Cherwant *praganna*, this time a village called Thaksaul. As a landholder, these *rauts* would have been profiting from the tenants or *raiti* whom they would have recruited to clear forest and farm the land in order to generate taxable revenue (for more on Nepal's economic history see the work of M C Regmi). Over time then, the incentive to continue the profession of their forebears could have lessened, and it seems likely that their professional designation became a *thar* or family name. Indeed, today there is a *Tarai* dwelling *thar* called Raut, of the superior *jat* or caste of Chhetri, and thus not at all associated with the low status ethnic Tharu, and whose family members have no relation to the low status elephant handling business whatsoever, which tends to recruit from landless peasants who are otherwise compelled into forced labour as a *kamaiya*.

### **Slide 9: The Significance of a One-Tusked Elephant**

Before I move onto the *hattisar* in the modern era, I would like to briefly return to consider the significance of the one-tusked elephant for which Daya and Kokil Raut were so generously rewarded. This relates to the lore surrounding Ganesha, the elephant-headed god and son of Shiva and Parvati, whose image or *murti* is almost invariably that of a deity with one-tusk (slide 5). This relates to his reputed gluttony, which on one occasion led to him tripping over a log and splitting open his gut, spilling his internal organs. Amused by his clumsy misfortune, the moon, Chandra, supposedly laughed at Ganesha, who out of anger snapped off his right tusk and hurled it at the moon.



Any elephant with a right tusk missing would be considered especially divine, and was particularly prized by Hindu Kings, for whom their elephants served as a symbol of their divinely consecrated regal power. An old Nepali veterinarian treatise for which I commissioned a translation, venerates the one-tusked elephant as the greatest of the 8 castes or types of elephant, whilst Prithvi Narayan Shah, founder of the Shah dynasty, proclaimed as the ‘unifier’ of Nepal, in *Dibya Upadesh*, his wise sermons, expresses his desire to obtain a one-tusked elephant.

What is also interesting about this instance of capturing a one-tusked elephant, who was given the name Jala Prasad, is what it also reveals about the reputation elephants themselves could garner. Daya Raut was remembered and rewarded for capturing an *ek danta hatti*, but the elephant he accomplished this with, also acquired fame. His exploits are recorded in Pandit Sundarananda’s history. He was called Sri Prasad, he commanded great respect, and he was praised as one who could trap freely walking elephants as easily as Rahu, the eclipse, traps the moon, Chandra, and the sun, Surya (Vajracharya 1962:222-226 in Krauskopff & Meyer [eds] 2000:150).

Okay, so this Panjiar material has served to provide some intimation as to the business of captive elephant management in the Shah and Rana eras, which is complemented by Smythies’ material on *rastriya shikar* in the early twentieth century. Now then, we are ready to move onto the modern function of the *hattisar*. I previously mentioned the post-war ousting of the patrimonial Rana state, its replacement by the alliance of King Tribhuvan and the Nepali Congress, and the move to open Nepal up to western modernity, with its values of democracy and development, or *loktantra* and *bikas* in the Nepali vernacular.

### **Slide 10: The Era of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation**

In this era of *bikas*, it was not merely modern ideas of development that began to gain ground, but also that of what we now call biodiversity conservation and natural resource management. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) sponsored spraying of DDT had finally made the lowland *Tarai* habitable for hill-dwelling peoples, the *pahari*, who had previously found its endemic malaria intolerable (Muller-Böcker 1999:28-29, Ojha 1983:28). Thus in-migration,

deforestation and wildlife habitat loss began to accelerate. With population density increasing and connections to global markets developing, the incentives for wildlife poaching also increased, posing a threat to the existence of the One-Horned Asian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). In 1962, under the rule of Tribhuvan's son and heir Mahendra, this led to the establishment of a sanctuary for the protection of the endangered rhino, a precursor to the Chitwan National Park, which was inaugurated in 1973 (Muller-Böker 1999:51, McLean 2000, McLean and Straede 2003).

The emergence of the legislation and apparatus for protected area management meant that Nepal's elephant stables acquired a new purpose, a new rationale for their continued existence, and the elephants and their handlers began to be deployed in the service of new functions. *Sarkari hattisar* were now managed under the auspices of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), a newly created division within the Ministry of Forestry. The DNPWC was effectively an expanded version of its precursor, the Rhino Protection Department, which had been established at the recommendation of the International Union for The Conservation of Nature (IUCN), after Gee's appraisal of rhino poaching in Chitwan in 1959 (Muller-Böker 1999:50).

### **Slide 11: The Hattisar as a Tool of Protected Area Management**

Captive elephants were now primarily deployed to:

1. Control poaching activities (Slide 7 – here we can see Ram Deo Mahato of the Sauraha *hattisar* with some soldiers on Moti Prasad, about to go on patrol)
2. Facilitate wildlife research (slide 8 – here we can see the elephants and staff of the Biodiversity Conservation Center conducting a rhino census in the Bharandabhar forest on a chilly winter morning)
3. Provide elephant safaris (slide 9 – here we can see a group of privately owned elephants and handlers prepped to take tourists on safari).

In 1973, The Smithsonian Institute implemented its Tiger Ecology Project, for which it purchased five elephants, recruiting local Tharu people to manage them, and developed facilities that were later utilised by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC). Created in 1982, the KMTNC (now just the

NTNC) has continued and expanded upon the work begun by the Smithsonian in Chitwan. For example, in 1986, when rhino numbers had sufficiently recovered, the KMTNC initiated the Rhino Translocation Program, an endeavour reliant on the use of both KMTNC and government elephants to corral and capture rhino. These were then subsequently transported to Bardia National Park and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve in the western and far western *Tarai* of Nepal in order to re-establish rhino populations.

However, this annual program has been suspended since 2003 due to the severity of the ongoing Maoist insurgency and subsequent political turmoil, during which time rhino numbers have again declined, perhaps even too far to make relocations viable. As a result, I was unable to witness a rhino translocation during my doctoral fieldwork, although some stock footage of a previous translocation is included in the documentary film ‘Servants of Ganesh’ which I co-produced.

With regard to elephants’ role in tourism, the professional hunter John Coapman pioneered their use in Nepal as safari vehicles. In 1963, inspired by the age of *shikar*, and at the permission of King Mahendra, he established the Tiger Tops safari lodge, complete with its own *hattisar*. For a premium fee, guests could stay in a luxurious jungle camp, receive expert briefings on wildlife, and be taken on viewing trips on elephant back. A close relationship with *sarkari hattisares* was maintained in these early days, and retired government handlers expressed to me their fond memories of working with ‘John Sahib’ as they called him.

Exclusive licenses for operating safaris within the Chitwan National Park remained limited, and only a further six were issued. After that, with tourism booming in Nepal, entrepreneurs noticed a gap in the market, and began to offer budget elephant safaris to cater for backpackers. Hotels began to proliferate in the nearby village of Sauraha at which a DNPWC office, a *sarkari hattisar*, and the KMTNC facility are based. The privately owned elephants of the Sauraha lodges are however prohibited from entering the park, and instead take tourists on wildlife-viewing safaris in the regenerated community controlled forests adjacent to the park (in which rhinos can easily be viewed).

## **Slide 12: Elephant Handler Lifeworlds**

Although government elephants are available for hire for tourist safaris (in Chitwan at the Sauraha stable but not at the Khorsor Breeding Center), their primary functions are in park management, conservation research, and a few residual uses in royal pageantry and other ceremonial occasions, as well as in sporting events such as elephant polo (Poorna Bahadur Thapa driving Karnali Kali as the polo player scores a goal at the 2003 World Elephant Polo championships at Meghauri, near the Tiger Tops lodge) and the recently re-established elephant races that began in 2005 (2010 poster). The growth of tourism using privately owned elephants without the rights to enter and graze within The Chitwan National Park, many of whom are leased from India along with their handlers, has meant that two parallel elephant handling worlds have emerged in the Chitwan area. These two elephant handling constituencies vary in their typical ethnic composition, their handling regimes, their typical work duties, and are largely oblivious to each other's lifeworlds.

The safari lodges with concessions to operate within Chitwan tend to recruit their handlers from among the Nepali population and utilise the Nepali three man elephant care system of a *phanet*, *patchurwa* and *mahut*, whereas those without exclusive licenses tend to utilise the Indian two man elephant care system of a first and second *mahut*. Furthermore, if safari lodges lease their elephants from India for the tourist high season, then they will additionally employ Indian handlers, since they tend to come with the elephant. Government handlers by contrast, continue to be recruited from persisting networks of personal recommendation, such that most handlers have relatives or co-villagers that have already enrolled as handlers (*hattisare*). Until 1999 work as a *sarkari hattisar* came with the added enticement of guaranteed employment until retirement at the age of 58, at which time one would be eligible to a pension at half-pay. This is called *sthyai kam*, but since then due to lack of funds, new recruits are no longer eligible for such rights, being subject instead to *asthyai kam*.

As a result of this pattern, the majority of *sarkari hattisares* in Chitwan come from districts to the east, which were previously the locations of government stables, but which are now deforested and are not located within a protected area for which a *hattisar* would be required. However, there has also been an increasing trend for non-Tharu men to apply for *hattisare* positions, such that Newars of the Shrestha *jat*, a

Nepali word that translates as ‘caste’ and the *janajati*, a Nepali word that translates as ‘ethnic group’, Tamang, a *pahari* group who migrated to the *Tarai* after malarial eradication, are fairly well represented. Shrestha and Tamang *hattisare* have even attained the highest-ranking positions within the hierarchy of elephant stable management, including that of *subba*, or elephant stable manager, and *adikrit subba*, the chief handler for all government elephant stables. Non-Tharu *hattisare* must however accept that the *hattisar* is a traditionally Tharu domain that retains its Tharu character, and employs some distinctly Tharu language elephant command words (from a repertoire of about 25 words, many of which are shared with the Hindi-derived command words of North Indian elephant handling traditions)<sup>2</sup>. This is the institutional world to which they must adapt if they wish to prosper as a *hattisare*.

### Slide 13: The Curtailed Autonomy of The Hattisar

In the age of *rastriya shikar* the *hattisar* seems to have been a relatively autonomous institution, largely self-governing despite its reliance on state sponsorship. The *hattisares* may have been the custodians of precious royal property that was additionally inflected by its sacred status as the instantiation of the Hindu elephant-headed god *Ganesha*, but it was only when they were providing their skilled services for *shikar* that they operated under the immediate supervision of upper echelon, state officials. At other times the *hattisar* was managed under the authority of its own local officers, the aforementioned *subba* and *adikrit subba*, with additional fiscal management provided by the *khardar* or administrator, who dispensed the salaries issued by central government.

The role of the *khardar* was often filled by Newars of the Shrestha caste, since most Tharu were non literate, which also partially accounts for Newar historical involvement with elephant handling, even leading to some of them taking up the hard physical work of elephant care and driving. The other factor of consideration is the establishment of the market town of Narayanghat by Bandipur Shresthas and their management of the trading post of Thori, which relied upon elephants as transport until a motorable road was built to facilitate the *shikar* for the Prince of

---

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the largely differing South Indian command vocabulary, albeit which also retain a few residual indicators of a possible prior pan-Indian command language, see Zvelebil 1979.

Wales in 1921. The *subba* was responsible for hiring new recruits, and in conjunction with the *khardar*, liaising with the *tekhdars*, the local contractors who supplied the food and supplies for the men and the elephants.

In the modern era of closer regulatory oversight by the wardens and rangers of the national parks however, these powers can only be exercised under the authorisation of the *subba* and *adikrit subba*'s superiors in the DNPWC administrative hierarchy, thus representing a curtailment of their prior authority. Similarly, although the *adikrit subba* or section officer, as the chief elephant handler, is supposedly responsible for all six of Nepal's *sarkari hattisar* (and the various forest posts), which are situated all across the *Tarai*, no provision is made for him to fulfil this stated duty by periodically inspecting these stables. Instead it has become customary for the *adikrit subba* to manage and reside at the Khorsor Elephant Breeding Center, the largest and most prestigious of Nepal's stables, established in 1986, at which the state's pregnant females usually come to give birth, and where their young are trained upon reaching the age of three.

#### **Slide 14: Hattisare as an Enclaved Community**

There is then a disparity between the previous autonomy of the *sarkari hattisar* and its current situation, subordinate to the authority of the park wardens, rangers and also to some extent the veterinarians. From *mahut* to *subba*, professional and social life in the *hattisar* is ordered according to this system of ranks. Life revolves around the keeping of elephants, in a space where the professional and the personal, the public and the private are not clearly separated, and in which low status handlers are expected to act with deference to their high status superiors from the DNPWC. This status differential is best understood in relation to Nepal's legacy of caste, which has profound implications for social relations. In 1854, during Rana rule, a civil code or *Muluki Ain* was instituted as law, and this included a caste system that separated the population into five ranked classes according to an idiom of purity and pollution. Most of the park officials are of either Bahun or Chhetri *jat*, which are equivalent to the Brahman and Kshatriya *varnas* that provides the Sankritic, textual basis for caste in India. In Nepal's *Muluki Ain*, both the Bahun and the Chhetri *jats* were of the primary rank, the *tagadhari* or 'wearers of the sacred thread'. The *janajati*

(or ethnic groups) like the Tharu and the Tamang however, were of the third rank, the *masine matwali*, or ‘enslaveable alcohol drinkers’ (see Höfer 1979).

This history of standardized inequality continues to inflect social relations today, with the result that the relatively low-status handlers constitute what I call an enclaved community. It is enclaved because its members are both spatially separated and socially segregated. They are unified by their subservient condition even as they are internally differentiated according to their own institutional hierarchy.

### **Slide 15: The Hattisar as a Total Institution**

To enter the *hattisar* is to enter a space subject to its own codes of conduct and appropriate behaviour. As a regimented institution then, the *hattisar* represents what the sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) calls a total institution. It is total because virtually all aspects of daily life are conducted in the same place under a single authority, because most members’ activities are conducted in unison with their colleagues, and because each phase of the day’s activities are subject to a daily routine. Finally, it is also a total institution because the activities of the *hattisar* derive from a rational plan designed to meet the objectives of the ruling institution (the DNPWC).

(optional- time permitting)

The barrier of status differentiation is mirrored in the relations between park officials and *hattisars*, whose sense of disempowerment forces them to cope with and resist domination in subtle forms akin to those famously characterised by James Scott in ‘Weapons of The Weak’ (1985). Such a situation of distrust is not conducive to effective cooperation between the park officials and the disrespected *hattisars* upon whom they depend, and whose expert knowledge and skilled practice is rarely adequately acknowledged.

With TB now rampant among Nepal’s elephant population, valued elephants dying and handlers grieving, effective communication between park officials and handlers is now more important than ever. The elephants cannot be effectively treated unless vets and handlers can work effectively together. It is hoped, by myself and colleagues in prospective partner organisations concerned with captive elephant management that this further research will serve to promote a greater appreciation

of the handlers' specialist skills and knowledge, and thereby facilitate improved working relations so as to help combat this disease that is jeopardising Nepal's elephant programme.

## Conclusion

To sum up, in the modern era the *hattisar* has been essential for:

- Rescuing the one-horned rhino from the brink of extinction through translocations and anti-poaching activities
- Facilitating other large mammal conservation programmes through the use of elephant-back monitoring teams
- Engendering a tourist economy that revolves around elephant safaris, with in-built schemes to generate income for community development

All of this depends upon a traditionally Tharu institution that developed as a result of the state's appetite for extravagant hunting sprees and for the symbolic value of elephants as divine beings. The *hattisar* became a regimented and enclosed domain that generates its own professional identity and sub-culture, which revolves around shared ritual, shared practice, and the transmission of knowledge and skill from master to apprentice in a total social world of human-elephant co-habitation. As my friend and informant Bukh Lal memorably remarked; "We know our elephants better than our own families".